Zionism and the Myth of Motherland

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Is the land of Israel truly the motherland of the Jewish people? To those who take at face value the opening claim of Israel's Declaration of Independence, that "in the land of Israel the Jewish people was born," the question may seem strange. That the land of Israel is the motherland of the Jews, where the nation was born and its spiritual and cultural identity forged, is an axiom of the Jewish national consciousness. Yet the Bible, our major source for ancient Jewish history, appears to refute the premise outright. The father of the Israelites, Abraham, was not born in Israel; the transformation of his descendants' families into a nation took place during their sojourn in Egypt; and the Tora, which was to define the religious and moral character of the nation, was given to this people in Sinai, outside the bounds of the promised land.

"Motherland" is one of the most potent words there is, and the most important term in the lexicon of nationalism. Wherever patriotic feelings are found, this word (or its variants, "homeland" and "fatherland") evokes both longing and commitment. Its emotional force draws upon primordial, mythic sources. In the broader cultural context, "motherland" signifies not only the place a person was born, but the birthplace of an entire nation. It

implies an earthly rootedness, a commitment to the land, which itself is understood to be a living entity, nurturing and abundantly fruitful.

The myth of motherland resonated throughout the ancient world, but its best-known rendition is to be found in Greek culture. Citizens of Athens regarded themselves as the original occupants of their land, proudly calling themselves "autochthons," after mythical creatures of the same name. Half-human, half-serpent, these creatures symbolized the Athenians' connection to their earthly origins. According to Greek mythology, the first king of Athens, Cecrops, was such a one. And this conception was not exclusively Athenian: The nobility of Thebes, for instance, considered themselves descendants of the teeth of the dragon the mythological hero Cadmus had sown into the earth. Owing to the Greek usage, the term "autochthonous" came to describe the connection between a native people and the land from which it is believed to have been born.

Unlike the birth of the biblical Adam from the earth, which signifies a universal provenance for all humanity, the autochthonous myth represents a connection between a given people and a particular land. Hence the importance modern nationalisms give to this type of primeval relationship, as the basis for a kind of "organic" nationalism—one which is tied to the land and draws its strength from it. In other words, the autochthonous myth is a historical one, whose basic purpose is to establish a people's historical legitimacy in its land.[1] Forming a kind of collective memory, the autochthonous myth helps an ethnic group develop its identity, deepen solidarity among its members, and defend its territorial rights against competing claims. Today such beliefs still form a central argument in the territorial claims of various groups, in places such as Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Australia.

In the modern West, however, autochthony is not the only way a people can relate to its land. If autochthony represents a mythic approach to man's relationship with nature, the opposite approach—the modern technological one—views the material world simply as a resource, devoid of any value other than its utility. In the West, this technological view of the world,

anchored in rationalist thought, exists in relation and in opposition to the mythic view of the human experience. The outstanding study by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, presents the Enlightenment and rationalism as expressions of Western man's rising up against the threat posed by the primeval forces of nature, as an attempt to develop tools that will enable him to control these forces and strip them of their mythological aura.[2] The result is the glorification of science and technology as ends in themselves—and the justification of an instrumental, rapacious attitude towards nature.

"The West," then, is to a large extent built upon two conflicting ideas: Technology and myth, the aspiration to dominate nature and the longing to unite with it. In essence, each of these contradictory impulses reflects a basic schism, an irreducible divide between man and the world. The formative experience of the mythical world, and subsequently of the modern industrialized world, is also its own fundamental, inescapable outcome: Man as the abused child of the earth, or as its pitiless master.

The cultural heritage of the West oscillates between these two poles, between what can be regarded as rationalist, technological "maturity," indifferent and at times even hostile to nature, and autochthonous "infantilism," romantic and anti-technological, which yearns to return to the original grace of natural pagan life. This oscillation affords no peace to Western thinkers pondering the relationship between man and the world, for calamity beckons from both extremes: At one end lies the systematic despoliation of the world, together with destruction of the human essence itself, by a ruthless industrial technology which becomes a value in its own right (as happened, for example, in the Soviet Union); at the other is the savagery of a society that has shed the veneer of cultural refinement and replaced it with a cult of nature and myth (as did Nazism). Thus it would be a mistake to reduce either autochthonous thought or its rationalist-technological opposite to the function of merely boosting national legitimacy. Instead, they should be understood in a broader sense, as reflecting the way a national

culture envisions the place of man—and the nation to which he belongs—in his natural setting.

Contemporary Israel, in this sense, is a typical Western society with regard to its approach to its natural environment. Its leaders and representatives pride themselves on the success of Zionism in establishing a state which is at the forefront in science and technology. No doubt this technological advantage is of great importance; it often seems, however, that its instrumental character is overlooked. Technological progress is invariably depicted as the cure for all of society's ills, but the price of its dominance is high: Relentless pollution and destruction of nature and, concomitantly, the alienation, apathy and detachment characteristic of modern society. Against these, one finds the awakening of the "green" groups, champions of the environment, that respond to exploitative-technological forces with their own romantic vision, which glorifies every field, spring and abandoned tract, calls for an end to construction and development, and aspires to a mystical union with nature.

Just how Jewish is the dominant technological impulse in Israel today? To what extent does the Israeli ethos reflect the Jewish path in history, which it claims to represent and continue? Does Jewish thought offer an alternative to the Western notion of man's place upon the land?

The attempt to examine how Jewish thought in its incarnations understood the relation between man and nature is an ambitious undertaking. Nonetheless, a number of general features of the Jewish approach to the natural, earthly and worldly can be discerned by focusing upon one aspect of that approach: The Jewish view of the autochthonous myth, as an expression of primordial existence which determined the fate of Western consciousness, even as it attacked it. By analyzing the Jewish response to autochthony, we may identify Judaism's own, unique understanding of man's place in nature, and how this understanding finds expression—or fails to find expression—in the modern project of Zionism.

The natural starting point for an examination of Judaism's view of autochthony is the Bible, which has shaped the Jewish consciousness throughout the generations. Not only is the Bible's account of the relationship between the Israelites and the promised land not autochthonous, it consistently rejects such an outlook. Unlike other peoples of the ancient Middle East, who saw themselves as the original offspring of their land, or at least tried to blur the problematic nature of the issue, the people of Israel always maintained an awareness of the fact that they were *not* indigenous to the land they inhabited.[3] This fact is stressed repeatedly in the Tora: The book of Genesis describes how the seventy original nations were dispersed "each with its language, according to their families and their peoples," though the people of Israel was not yet among them.[4] The birthplace of the Israelites' founding father, Abraham, is explicitly stated to be Ur of the Chaldeans (in modern-day Iraq), which God commanded him to leave: "Go forth out of your land, out of your motherland, out of your father's house, to the land that I will show you."[5] At a time when the other nations were already dwelling in their lands, the Hebrews were landless, wanderers in foreign realms. Accordingly, in the Tora's prescription for the ceremonial offering of the first fruits, the Jewish farmer, tiller of the soil, is obligated to mention that his father Abraham was a "wandering Aramean"—a nomad.[6]

Why does the Bible reject the autochthonous myth for the people of Israel? The answer lies in the Bible's rejection of the broader worldview which the myth reflects—a mythological-matriarchal conception of nature. In this worldview, man experiences nature as an all-embracing mother, upon whose graces he is utterly dependent. "Motherland" is the archetypal female: Mother of all living things, bearer of the keys to birth, death and regeneration. The fertility and mystery rituals of the ancient world's religions expressed a longing for a bridge between man and wild, primeval nature. They sought to demonstrate the organic connection between human existence and the living, breathing essence of the world. These rituals afforded their initiates a glimpse

into the cycles of death and regeneration of the universe, and the opportunity to unite once again with the great mother earth.

In the biblical view, these rituals were an abomination, to be wiped off the face of the earth. This attitude stems not only from a moral revulsion to the violence and licentiousness many of them entailed but, first and foremost, from a rejection of the worldview they reflected. As stressed repeatedly in the Bible, the source of grace and bounty is not the living earth, but the living God, who stands above nature. This belief is the basis for many commandments in the Tora, such as giving to the poor the gleanings from the forgotten sheaves and corners of the fields, as well as bringing tithes and expropriating lands to establish cities for the Levites and the priests. Perhaps the most explicit articulation of this idea appears in the explication of the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years: "The land shall not be sold for ever, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me."[7] Put another way, the land does not belong to humans. Nor does its value derive from being an independent, divine entity: The land is valuable because it is consecrated to God.

Moreover, the Bible rejects outright the notion that a person or nation can have full ownership of a land. The true master of the entire world is God, who, in his benevolence, divides up the land and allocates portions of it to the various nations as he sees fit: "When the Most High gave nations their homes / And set the divisions of man / He fixed the boundaries of peoples / In relation to Israel's numbers."[8] In other words, not only the Hebrews, but all peoples were given their boundaries by God. Thus, in the story of the Israelite conquest of the areas east of the Jordan River, God warns Moses that the children of Israel must not take for themselves the lands of the Moabites and the Ammonites, "For I will not give you any of their land as a possession, because I have given it as a possession to the children of Lot."[9] And any human inhabitants of the land, even if they are autochthonous peoples, may be replaced according to the decision of God:

That, too, is considered Refa'im country. Refa'im used to dwell there—the Ammonites called them Zamzumim, a people great and numerous

and as tall as the Anakites. The Eternal destroyed them before [the Ammo-nites]; they dispossessed them and settled in their place. So he did for the children of Esau who live in Se'ir, when he destroyed the Horites before them, so that they dispossessed them and settled in their place, as is still the case.[10]

The Bible does not regard autochthony as any basis for territorial right or privilege. Quite the contrary: The biblical text goes out of its way to refute the validity of autochthony in light of the divine will.

The recognition that "the earth is the Eternal's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants,"[11] then, is the basis for understanding the Jewish claim to the land of Israel. This claim derives from a divine promise, the product of the covenant between Abraham and God:

> I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be a God for you and your offspring to come. I give to you and your offspring after you the land in which you sojourn, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.[12]

Particularly striking is the fact that here, as in many other places, the Bible refers to the promised land as the "land of Canaan," recalling the name of its former inhabitants. This serves as a kind of reminder—as well as a warning. The land is consecrated to God, and consequently must be treated with respect. Whoever dwells there must live according to a particular moral code, the violation of which entails severe punishment: "Thus the land became defiled, and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spat out its inhabitants. But you must keep my laws and my rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things.... That the land not spit you out for defiling it, as it spat out the nation that came before you."[13]

The prophet Jeremiah similarly offers the reason for God's imminent wrath against his people: "I brought you to this country of farmland, to

enjoy its fruit and its bounty. But you came and defiled my land; you turned my inheritance into an abomination."[14] From these and other, similar verses, we learn that the inhabitants' moral responsibility towards the land stems not only from the unique religious destiny of the people of Israel, as expressed by the giving of the Tora at Sinai, but also from the very fact of their dwelling on sacred land, land which belongs to God.[15]

Clearly, then, the Bible rejects the notion of an organic, unmediated connection between a people and its land. Still, it does not take issue with the basic idea of territory; instead, it offers a unique doctrine, one which anchors the Hebrews' territorial rights to the land of Israel in a decree by the supreme divine authority—and in that alone. This is clearly expressed in the eleventh-century commentary of Rashi on the first verse of the Tora: "*In the beginning God created*—R. Yitzhak says: Should the Tora not have begun with the verse 'This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months,' which is the first commandment given to Israel?[16] Why did it begin with 'In the beginning'?" And the answer: "That if the peoples of the world should say to Israel, 'You are thieves, for you conquered the lands of the seven nations [the Hittites, the Parizites, the Emorites, the Canaanites, the Jebusites, the Girgashites, and the Hivvites],' Israel may reply to them, 'All the earth belongs to the Holy One, and he gave it to whomever he pleased. When he so willed it, he gave it to them; and when he so willed it, he took it from them and gave it to us.'"[17]

Yet the same theological-political logic which provides the moral justification for the Israelites' conquest of the land also places a sword of Damocles over their heads, in the form of the threat of exile. Exile is the punishment for flouting the moral code which obligates the inhabitants of the land in general, and the Jews, as the chosen people, in particular. Exile is more than expulsion from one's territory: It is the severing of a people's connection with the world, and the withdrawal of divine grace from the nation.

A catastrophe of this order, a disgrace that amounts to an existential crisis, can cast doubt on the very continuation of the collective Jewish identity. How is Jewish existence possible after banishment from grace? The biblical worldview suggests a strategy for coping: Instead of regarding exile as the annulment of the divine promise, it should be understood as its confirmation, its grim fulfillment. The exile is a lesson which can be understood only in the context of a breach of the contract between the people and their God. This is the causality which drives Jewish history; this is its excruciating consistency. Thus, in his commentary on the book of Genesis, Nahmanides writes: "This is the eternal law of God: After God had expelled from the land the nations which had revolted against him, he installed his servants in it, as they knew that through service they would inherit it; and that if they sinned ... the land would spit them out, as it spat out the nation which preceded them."[18]

The Bible presents the possibility of exile as a permanent threat against the land's inhabitants. The destruction of the First Temple, and the establishment and subsequent destruction of the Second Temple, in no way undermined this line of thought in Jewish theology; to no small degree these events actually reinforced it. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the rabbis took for granted that the calamity was the result of Jewish wrongdoing. One mishnaic statement posits that "Exile comes into the world by virtue of idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, bloodshed and the desecration of the Sabbatical year."[19] The Mishna and Talmud contain many similar declarations regarding the grounds for destruction and redemption. As illustrated by the above statements of Rashi and Nahmanides—who lived a millennium after the Temple was destroyed—the belief in the contingency of man's link to the land continued to be a basic assumption of Jewish tradition, even over the course of many generations in exile.[20]

Still, the loss of sovereignty, combined with the blows dealt by the crushing of the Great Revolt against the Romans (first century c.e.) and of the Bar Kochba Revolt (second century c.e.), undermined the political

confidence of the Jewish people. The sense of being cut off from divine protection (the "exile of the *Shechina*") made the Jew a stranger in a strange world, a homeless child abandoned to the vagaries of the nations, even when in his own land. In exilic consciousness, the Jew found a new home within the text: "Since the destruction of the Temple, the Holy One has nothing in his world but the four cubits of halacha."[21] This found expression in, among other things, a downgrading of the status of the Bible—the political, historical text in which a direct connection with the land is assumed—in favor of halachic literature, which is ahistorical in both form and content. Concurrently, the collective memory of the physical, concrete experience of the land of Israel gradually faded, replaced by longings more metaphysical in nature. In contrast to its original status as a plot of earth, the land of Israel grew metaphorical wings, was treated increasingly as the "palace of the king,"[22] a sublime, metaphysical entity. Thus, when Zionism burst on the scene a century ago, it found the national consciousness of the Jews to be in a state of chronic abstraction, greatly distanced from the enterprise of national renewal.

Yet alongside the religious consciousness, which had largely abandoned the practical, political side of the connection to the land while continuing to adhere to it on an ideal, spiritual, ahistorical plane, another view developed in the exile of the modern era, one which made a complete break from the biblical connectedness to the land. It was expressed in the writings of a number of educated Jewish thinkers who were familiar with Western culture yet maintained ties to Jewish thought, while rejecting its national-worldly side. By virtue of their exposure to European history and philosophy, these thinkers were well aware of the nature of Western nationalism, and the myths that sustained it. They developed a theory that depicted the state of exile as no less than the essence of Jewish uniqueness; in so doing, they made explicit a view which in more traditional circles was at most only hinted at: That a return by the Jewish nation to the Holy Land—what in rabbinical literature was known as "storming the ramparts"—was not only undesirable from a political point of view, but also alien to the spirit of post-biblical Judaism.

The most important proponent of this position was Franz Rosenzweig, the Jewish-German philosopher and theologian, who was among the harshest critics of Zionism. Rosenzweig held that the exile of the Jewish people from its land was not a curse but a blessing, one which placed the Jews above other nations. In his analysis of the national consciousness, Rosenzweig points to the central role of autochthony:

> People prefer to think that they have been indigenous since primeval times, born out of the land, autochthonous. They want to acquire the most irrefutable tenure rights, i.e., the *jus primi occupantis* [rights of first occupancy], on the land that they own. [They say:] they have been living here forever, it has never been different. Only unwillingly, the peoples regard themselves as immigrants, because then the right to their land appears to them as uncertain or at least doubtful.[23]

But Rosenzweig grasped the rationale behind the autochthonous argument as a sign of weakness rather than strength, as reflecting a primitive consciousness. He explains that the national identity is usually held together by two factors—the nation's common origin and its possession of the land:

> The peoples of the world are not content with the bonds of blood. They sink their roots into the night of earth, lifeless in itself but the spender of life, and from the lastingness of earth they conclude that they themselves will last. Their will to eternity clings to the soil and to the reign over the soil, to the land. The earth of their homeland is watered by the blood of their sons, for they do not trust in the life of a community of blood, in a community that can dispense with anchorage in solid earth.[24]

The Jewish people, in contrast, is the one nation on earth for whom blood ties are sufficient, the one nation which does not require earthly rootedness:

> We were the only ones who trusted in blood and abandoned the land; and so we preserved the priceless sap of life which pledged us that it would be eternal. Among the peoples of the world, we were the only ones who separated

what lived within us from all community with what is dead. For while the earth nourishes, it also binds. Whenever a people loves the soil of its native land more than its own life, it is in danger.…[25]

Rosenzweig, then, is rather at home with exile. Contrary to the Jewish tradition, which sees it as a punishment, he considers exile to be a matter of choice, of willing relinquishment. For Rosenzweig, the earth is "dead," and the devotion which the nations of the world exhibit towards it is a gratuitous risk of life. The abnormal life in exile, shorn of land and state, is the mission of the people of Israel, a people that belongs not to history but to eternity. Retaking the land would constitute a betrayal of this mission. Rosenzweig asserts that for the Jews the land of Israel should always remain out of reach, an object of longing only, for this people "never loses the untrammelled freedom of a wanderer who is more faithful a knight to his country when he roams abroad, craving adventure and yearning for the land he has left behind, than when he lives in that land. In the most profound sense possible, this people has a land of its own only in that it has a land it yearns for—a holy land."[26]

Rosenzweig's justification of exile, then, turns the biblical negation of autochthony on its head. Whereas in the Bible this negation serves to vindicate the conquest of the land, for Rosenzweig it undermines any active connection with the land, and provides further evidence that the spiritual and ethical mission of the Jews lies in exile. Rosenzweig's position simply dismisses the plain meaning of the Bible, and the yearning expressed there to settle in the promised land. Similar arguments can be found among other non-Zionist intellectual Jews, such as Hannah Arendt, Edmond Jabés and George Steiner.[27]

In Zionism we find, for the first time in Jewish history, an attempt to adopt the autochthonous myth, by imitating "organic" European nationalism. The first Zionists, as well as the generations that followed, fashioned the new Jewish nationalism according to the political models they had

encountered elsewhere, whether in the form of socialist revolution or bourgeois liberalism. Under these circumstances, the borrowing of the autochthonous motif from nineteenth-century European nationalism was a predictable step. It served as a founding element of the new political consciousness, bearing only a pale resemblance to the "old" national Jewish experience. As David Ben-Gurion put it: "The Zionist conception was revolutionary to the core. It was a revolt against a centuries-long tradition, a tradition of exilic life in practice and infertile longings, lacking the will for redemption. In place of barren, pallid longings came a will for realization; in place of a detached exilic life—the effort to build and create on the soil of the motherland."[28]

The autochthonous principle found its place in Zionist thought and rapidly put down roots in the new national experience, not merely because it had been a fundamental element in the nationalisms that had influenced the fathers of Zionism, but also because it furthered two basic Zionist objectives. The first, which was the essential goal during the early stages of the new settlement, was the grand existential-spiritual mission—the ontological project—of Zionism: The renewal of the lost connection between the Jew and earthly reality, nature and land, of which the autochthonous (or, more precisely, near-autochthonous) consciousness was a significant element. The second objective, already present at the outset of Zionism but becoming all the more important with the passage of time, was the political and educational campaign to distinguish Zionism from colonialism. This issue did not particularly trouble the early immigrants, who were mostly indifferent to the political implications of the Arab presence in the land of Israel.[29] In the eyes of these socialist pioneers, their own right to the land was based primarily on the legitimacy conferred by their labors, which redeemed the land from abandonment and desolation. Only after the Arab problem ignited in the 1920s did the historical claim to the land gather strength, developing an autochthonous character as a counterweight to the territorial claims of "indigenous" Arabs.[30]

The autochthonous myth had made its first appearance in Zionist culture in the writings of the Hovevei Zion ("Lovers of Zion") movement in

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their literature, it is claimed that contrary to the biblical account, the Hebrew people was indeed born *in* the land of Israel. Subjugated by the Canaanites, the Hebrews suffered political and cultural oppression until they were liberated by Joshua.[31] A prominent autochthonous motif appears, for instance, in the writings of Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, who had a powerful influence on an entire generation of Zionist thinkers and artists. Berdichevsky's vibrant nationalism called for casting off the Jewish tradition that had begun in Yavneh with R. Yohanan ben Zakai, which the writer held to be a legacy of detachment and passivity, under the protective aegis of the Tora. Berdichevsky, clearly inspired by Nietzsche, sought to reveal in Judaism a kind of primitive youth, almost idolatrous in force, which would generate the drive and vitality necessary to create a "new Jew," earthy and close to nature. He urged the people to turn their backs on spineless spirituality, and to return to "the primeval past before the giving of the book," in which the Jew was united with nature in a primal, mythic embrace.[32]

Despite the foreignness of Berdichevsky's ideas to Zionist leaders such as Herzl and Ahad Ha'am, or to the thought of religious Zionism, they had considerable influence on the socialist stream in Zionism, the force which led the movement for most of its history and had a decisive impact on its final form. The three most prominent figures of the Labor movement—Berl Katznelson, Yitzhak Tabenkin and David Ben-Gurion—saw Berdichevsky as a decisive influence in determining their paths.[33] The idea of creating a new Jew from the ancient mold took hold of the pioneers of the second and third Aliyot who, in the name of the Zionist ideal and the socialist idea, had cut themselves off from their families, communities and other components of traditional Jewish identity in exile. Despite their thoroughly modern worldview, these people felt a need to attach themselves to a shared historical past and an ancient collective memory, which would imbue their deeds with meaning and validity.

Thus the Zionist enterprise grew mythic roots from which it could draw vitality for its pioneering endeavor. The settlers of the Labor movement,

which had abandoned their halachic heritage as associated with exilic Judaism, adopted the Bible as a literary and historical work that expressed the ancient connection between the people and its land, between the Jew and his native landscape. In the Bible, the pioneers found what they had missed in the rabbinic literature: An earthly, corporeal, natural life on the land. As Tabenkin attested, "The Bible served as a kind of birth certificate for the immigrant, helping him erase the line between man and the land, and develop a 'sense of motherland.' These ties evoked human powers that helped him put down roots and cleave to this plot of earth, so different in climate, nature and views from the land of his birth."[34] In the eyes of the socialist pioneers, the Bible was understood as a basis for the "myth of our right to the land," instilling a sense of indigenousness and ownership among the *sabras*—nearly all of whom were immigrants or children of immigrants.[35]

Zionist propaganda and pedagogy, then, stressed the "native" aspects of the national experience in the Bible, which were considered to bear immediate historical, political and educational significance. An apt description of this consciousness and its meaning appears in sociologist Oz Almog's study of the *sabra*, the native-born Israeli: "If the territories conquered are the liberated lands of our forefathers, then the native Israeli warrior who liberated them is no mere second-generation European, but the successor to the biblical youth who scaled the mountains of Canaan in their sandals…. If the pioneers felt at home in the land of Israel upon their arrival, their native-born children saw themselves, by virtue of the myth, as if they had lived in the land from time immemorial, like the trees of the field and the wild animals of the land of Israel."[36]

It was David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and the leader of socialist Zionism, who most actively promoted the autochthonous conception. After the establishment of the state, he began to show heightened interest in the Bible, perhaps under the influence of events during the War of Independence.[37] Over time, Ben-Gurion even developed a number of original ideas concerning the biblical texts and history. One of them was that the Hebrew tribes had inhabited the land of Israel in times predating the exodus

from Egypt. In fact, in Ben-Gurion's view, the Hebrew nation predated even Abraham, whom Ben-Gurion numbered among its sons. In one of the forums he held on these subjects with scholars and biblical researchers, Ben-Gurion opined that

> The people of Israel, or the Hebrew people, was born in the land and raised in the land, even before the days of Abraham, as one of the peoples of Canaan. It was dispersed among the south, central and northern regions, and its spiritual and perhaps also its political center was Shechem. I accept as unquestionable facts the exodus from Egypt, the appearance of Moses and the event at Mount Sinai; these were central and decisive events in the chronicles of our people, whose consequences are recognizable to this day. Yet, in my opinion, only a few families, of the most exalted lineage and perhaps also among the most important, descended to Egypt. The Hebrews dwelt in the land among the Canaanite peoples even prior to Abraham. Their language was Hebrew, like the language of the other peoples of Canaan and Moab and Ammon, yet from the outset they were distinguished from all their neighbors by one thing: They believed in one God, a supreme God, ruler of heaven and earth.[38]

Originally the autochthonous myth in Zionism served for the most part as an educational-cultural motif for strengthening ties to the land. As a historical argument, it appeared only later, as a response to competing claims from the local Arab population. The basic argument was that the Hebrews' presence in their motherland during the biblical period had endowed them with a kind of original entitlement, in comparison with the populations which came after. This entitlement did not expire with the exile, since the Jews never willingly left the land. It was in 1937, in the course of his testimony before the British Peel Commission, which deliberated the future of the land of Israel, that Ben-Gurion coined the expression "The Mandate is not our Bible—the Bible is our mandate." Scholar of Zionism Eliezer Schweid presents the conventional formulation of this view: "The argument on behalf of a historical right is not based on the fact that once, in the distant past,

the forefathers of the Jewish people dwelt in the land of Israel. It is based on the determination that the connection between the people and its land was never terminated.... The people of Israel was constrained to leave its land and prevented from returning to it. It never relinquished its right, and a possession whose owners do not relinquish it to those who stole it remains a possession."[39]

So Zionism created a national story based, among other things, on artificial myths—admixtures of modern European ideas and selective interpretations of Jewish history. The result may have been political, economic and military success in the short and medium run, yet in the long run it was an educational and cultural failure which only now is showing its full effect. The collapse of the pioneer ethic created a large ideational vacuum, leading in the last twenty years to the rapid alienation of Israeli culture from its land and its past. As a result, Israel has developed a rootless culture, characterized by the chronic aping of mindless fads and fashions.

This sort of societal ennui is fertile ground for the emergence of new theories to justify the current academic and political trends. In a manner reminiscent of Rosenzweig, a number of post-Zionist intellectuals have promoted the "exilic consciousness" as a preferable, more colorful and humane alternative to Jewish nationalism. They offer up an apparent conflict between Zionism and Judaism: The former, by their account, is a tribal and oppressive reality, the outgrowth of a difficult political situation; the latter is portrayed as a pristine, liberated morality, deriving its force from an abstract reading of the text.[40]

In this context, of course, not only is modern Zionism invalid, but so is ancient Israelite nationalism. In post-Zionist academic literature on the Bible, for example, is found the fashionable post-modern claim that God's promise to give his chosen nation a land which belongs to the "other" is taken to signify a guilty conscience on the part of the author over stealing the land from its original inhabitants. Those who hold such a position discern within the Bible a "subversive" attitude toward the settlement of the land, which ultimately reaches full expression in the tradition of the Sages,

who purportedly have abandoned willingly the national concept of the redemption of the land, and consequently are depicted as the forefathers of post-Zionism.[41]

The intellectual failure of autochthonous Zionism has granted surprising legitimacy in Israeli society to theories expressing the most extreme exilic position—theories like those of Rosenzweig, which claim that the true Jewish ethos involves a detachment from concrete, earthly reality. Ironically, this position has come to the fore just as the Jewish presence in the land, politically and demographically, has reached its most significant level since biblical times.

J ewish thought, then, offers three basic positions regarding the national experience vis-à-vis the land of Israel: The biblical position, with theology and politics intertwined in one holistic worldview; the exilic position, engaging theology but not politics; and the Zionist position, which is political but usually not theological. These three approaches find their clearest voice in their response to autochthonous nationalism. The Bible rejects autochthony as irrelevant in view of the political presence of God, who allocates and revokes national rights in the framework of covenantal and contractual arrangements with his creatures. Exilic thought rejects autochthony as incorporating physicality and worldliness from which it is cut off, whether by compulsion (as in the case of the Rabbis) or by choice (as in the case of Rosenzweig and the post-Zionists). Finally, the central stream of Zionism, that of the Labor movement, adopted the autochthonous position, chiefly because it provided a mythic foundation for the revolution in consciousness which this stream sought to effect.

Yet the cultural project of Zionism did not achieve this revolution in consciousness. From the perspective of a hundred years of Zionism and fifty years of statehood, Israel is a resounding political, military and economic success. But has it realized the dream of Ben-Gurion and his peers to create a "new Jew" in the land of Israel, one connected by an organic, unbreakable

link to his "motherland"? The answer to this is clearly negative. In contemporary Israel, the spirit of pioneering vitality and the vision which inspired the early Zionist settlement have dissipated almost entirely. Groups such as Gush Emunim and certain elements of the Kibbutz movement today are merely exceptions which prove the rule. Political alienation from a historical inheritance that has simply become "the territories," and the increasing instrumentalist-commercial approach to the lands of Israel, are clear expressions of the citizens' continued disjunction from the land. Thus it is not difficult to agree with the words of Eliezer Schweid, that "The ties to the motherland of the generation that was born in Israel, on the level of consciousness, are tenuous and easily undermined."[42]

Does all this reflect a basic flaw in the Zionist effort to revolutionize the Jew's relationship to his historic land, or does it have something to do with the universal plight of modern man, the distancing of man from nature in this era of technological culture? Evidently the answer is a combination of the two. Together with the autochthonous element borrowed from European nationalism, Zionism also adopted the West's exploitative materialism. The wane of the artificial autochthonous myth was accompanied by the ascendance of the alienated technological approach, which denies the land all inherent value. Ironically, the sense of primordial belonging encouraged a sense of mastery over the soil, a feeling the Zionists took pains to cultivate. With the passage of time, however, motherland became real estate, and the Zionist enterprise found itself subverted. As a result, Israelis of the 1990s once again are experiencing, in many ways, the very alienation from reality that Zionism had sought to correct. This alienation appears not in the form of a people exiled to a foreign land, but as individuals living on their own land, in a modern society which treats the land as a resource tagged for crude industrial exploitation, or as a commodity which can be bartered for political gain.

The dead end to which Zionist autochthony has invariably led, on the one hand, and the Siberian chill of a technological internal exile, on the other, open the door for a meaningful alternative to both: The biblical approach.

The Bible offers a unique concept of the relation between man, land and God, one which puts a check on man's domination of the land, but without rendering him a slave of nature. According to this view, a people can never fully own the land upon which it dwells, for "the earth is the Eternal's and all that it holds." The crucial point here is that man's dependency upon God dictates a relationship of responsibility on the part of the people of Israel towards the land which has been delivered into its hands, a responsibility which is primarily ethical, while implying an ecological dimension as well: "When you lay siege against a city for many days, to make war with it and capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the axe against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. For are trees of the field human beings, that you besiege them as well?"[43] The very notion of the agricultural Sabbatical year, too, underscores this approach: "When you enter the land that I give you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Eternal."[44] The land, like all living things, is entitled to a sort of rest, dedicated to God: "But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath for the Eternal...."[45] On this subject Martin Buber wrote:

> In the Bible, the earth is responsible for the guilt of man, who stems from the earth and cleaves to it. The two are conjoined together, whether in joy or in tragedy, in such a manner, that man is the one who determines, through his actions or failure to act, the fate of the earth, which then becomes his fate. ... Man is subjected to the yoke of the commandments of a God who reveals to him His will. Through the act of creation of this same God, he is so closely engaged with the earth, that the manner in which he relates to the Divine command either directly benefits or harms the earth.[46]

The biblical worldview, then, demands that man assume moral responsibility for his world. The Bible presents us with an alternative, both to the existential positions of the West—the rationalist-technological one and the mythic-autochthonous one—and to the exilic Jewish outlook, in which land is unimportant. The biblical alternative introduces an element of foreignness, of "otherness," between man and the world. This otherness,

which in the Western-Greek tradition is at times a cause for rejection, aggression or fear, and in the exilic-Jewish position is an expression of detachment and alienation, serves in the Bible as a basis for responsibility and commitment. "Cursed be the ground because of you," says God to Adam; yet, simultaneously, "By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground—for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."[47]

The land, then, is permanently divided from man, ever the "other"; yet at the same time, it is forever *close* to him, signifying both his cradle and his grave. The poet Uri Zvi Greenberg gave voice to this in his "A Man's Home":

> Only he who returns to the village at evening truly goes home:
> He rolls off his back the city of exile, resolves for himself
>   the riddle of longing
> And the sadness-worry on this account, which man carries inside
> All the days he exists in this sophisticated world, which is late...
> Homeland of Adam, from which he was uprooted, is the reason
>   for the longing
> And grief and rootlessness;
> The secret of the cutting of the wings while they are still touching...
> Is the secret of the nomad's wrath.[48]

This traditional Jewish rejection of mythical autochthony finds its fullest expression in the Bible. Pro-exilic Judaism chose to interpret the rejection of autochthony as the negation of the territory in general, in favor of an ahistorical, rootless destiny. This interpretation is surely not consistent with the biblical perspective, which is existential (that is to say, ontological) and simultaneously political, in the sense that it strives to realize its moral ideals by establishing an actual "kingdom of priests and holy nation."[49] As a result, dwelling in the land of Israel is a necessary condition for realizing the historical mission of the Jewish people: Without the political, there can be no full expression of the ethical.

The Bible's unique claim regarding the relationship between man and earth, and between the people and the land, is of paramount significance for the continuation of Zionism. Even if the modern Jew does not necessarily accept the whole religious structure of beliefs of the Bible, he should be open to the biblical commitment to existence, and its necessary implications for the political, social, technological and ecological spheres.[50] The Bible teaches us that the path of the Jew in history is just such a path of responsibility, not only towards his peers, but towards the natural world in which he lives and from which he is nourished as well, for the two cannot be separated.

"Motherland" need not be an autochthonous myth or a sterile technical term; it can also be an ethical obligation. Israeli society, afflicted with flight from responsibility on the personal and public levels, needs to relearn the meaning of concern, of compassion, of true engagement *in the world*. Out of a sense of responsibility, Israel needs to return and take up again the spirit of actualization, of national self-realization. The return to being, to the living essence of the soil of the motherland, need not be religious or mythic. It can be, simply, a moral calling.

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Notes

1. Cf. Eli Bar Navi, "Myth and Historical Reality: The Case of the Salic Law," *Zmanim*, Summer 1984, pp. 4-16. [Hebrew]

2. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1944).

3. Moshe Greenberg, *On the Bible and Judaism: A Collection of Articles*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1986), p. 110. [Hebrew]

4. Genesis 10:5.

5. Genesis 12:1.

6. Deuteronomy 26:5.

7. Leviticus 25:23.

8. Deuteronomy 32:8-9.

9. Deuteronomy 2:9,19.

10. Deuteronomy 2:20-22.

11. Psalms 24:1.

12. Genesis 17:6-9.

13. Leviticus 18:25-28.

14. Jeremiah 2:7.

15. The earth in general, and the land of Israel in particular, is held to be the exclusive possession of God, and exile constitutes a punishment. Exile signifies the abrogation of the right to inherit the land, and the transferring of this right to the conqueror. "I made the land, man and the animals on the face of the earth through my great power and my outstretched arm, and I have given it to whomever I see fit. Now I have delivered all of these lands into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. I have also given him the beasts of the field to work the land." Jeremiah 2:67.

16. Exodus 12:2.

17. Rashi on Genesis 1:1.

18. Nahmanides' commentary on Genesis 1:1.

19. Mishna Avot 5:9. See also Shabat 33a.

20. This approach was foreign to Greek thought, with which Jewish thought clashed beginning in the Second Temple period. If the Hebrew possession of the land of Israel was regarded by the Bible and its commentators as a contractual right, in the eyes of Hellenic polemicists, the birth peoples—the Canaanites—were endowed with a more fundamental right, stemming from their autochthony. Greek political philosophy considered civil rights to be based primarily on birth (*genos*), a claim which can be translated into both the individual and the collective realms, as the Athenians did. Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford, 1993). In disputing these opinions, the biblical story of the Hebrews' conquest of the land evidently constituted a real political burden for Jewish apologetics. The extreme violence towards the autochthonous inhabitants of the land, as depicted in the book of Joshua,

apparently served as a particularly effective weapon in the hands of those who challenged Israel's right to the land: Here we have a political community (or communities) forcibly uprooted from the land in which it was born, and annihilated by foreigners, who even take pride in the deed. In these polemics the Jews sometimes resorted to legal tools, on which there was consensus with Gentile polemicists. The rabbinic tradition retreated to some degree from the uncompromising biblical line by sometimes grounding territorial claims in property rights: "There are three [places] on whose account the nations of the world cannot defraud Israel, by claiming that Israel stole them. These are: the cave of Machpelah, the grave of Joseph and the Temple." The reasoning is, of course, that these three sites, in contrast with the rest of the land, were bought for full payment, rather than conquered by force. Cf. Yohanan Levy, "Disputes Regarding Land in Israel in Ancient Times," in *Olamot Nifgashim* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1969), pp. 60-78. [Hebrew]

21. Brachot 8a.

22. Prominent examples of this can be found in kabbalistic literature, among the Sabbateans and in the Hasidic movement.

23. Franz Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte (Spirit and Times of Jewish History)," in *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937), p. 19.

24. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 299.

25. Rosenzweig, *Star*, p. 299.

26. Rosenzweig, *Star*, p. 300.

27. Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1978); Edmond Jabés, "The One Who Says a Thing Doesn't Strike Roots," interview with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, in Sarit Shapira, ed*., Paths of Nomadism—Migration, Journeys and Passages in Current Israeli Art* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1991), pp. 9-16 [Hebrew]; George Steiner, "The Wandering Jew," *Ptachim* 1, 1966, pp. 17-23. [Hebrew]

28. *Dialogue on the State and the Culture*, David Ben-Gurion with Haim Hazaz, October 1962 (pamphlet), p. 12. [Hebrew]

29. In the words of writer Amos Ayalon, "Many members of the second Aliya shut their eyes when it came to the Arabs. It is as if these pioneers deliberately ejected the Arabs from their consciousness." Amos Ayalon, *The Israelis* (Jerusalem: Adam, 1981), p. 123. [Hebrew]

30. Signs of the polemic are recognizable to this day in the character of the claims regarding "historical right" voiced by the two sides. Take, for example, the

Palestinian attempt to appropriate a Canaanite ethnic identity in order to prove ancient autochthony in the land of Israel.

31. Eliezer Schweid, *Homeland and Designated Land* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), p. 218. [Hebrew]

32. Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "From Two Pasts," in *The Writings of Micha Yosef Ben Garion (Berdichevsky): Essays* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1960). [Hebrew]

33. Cf. Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), p. 166. [Hebrew]

34. Yitzhak Tabenkin, "The Ideational Sources of the Second Aliya," in *Dvarim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 1972), vol. 2, p. 25. [Hebrew]

35. Oz Almog, *The Sabra: A Portrait* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), p. 81. [Hebrew]

36. Almog, *The Sabra*, p. 81.

37. As conjectured by Anita Shapira in Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews*, p. 233.

38. David Ben-Gurion, *Studies in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved and the Society for the Study of Bible in Israel, 1976), p. 61. [Hebrew]

39. Schweid, *Homeland*, p. 210.

40. A typical example is Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin's article "Israel Has No Homeland: On the Place of the Jews," *Te'oria Uvikoret* 5, Fall 1994, pp. 79-101.

41. W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974).

42. Schweid, *Homeland*, p. 224.

43. Deuteronomy 20:19.

44. Leviticus 25:2.

45. Leviticus 25:4. Clearly, this practice also reflects pragmatic agricultural logic, yet it should be noted that the land is treated as an entity with rights. This is not simply a literary metaphor, but a position of moral and ecological import. And as already mentioned, the biblical conception is emphasized in the statement in Mishna Avot 5:9, which associates the exile from the land with severe moral transgressions and a neglect of obligations toward the land.

46. Martin Buber, *Between the People and Its Land* (Jerusalem: Shocken, 1905), pp. 16, 18. [Hebrew]

47. Genesis 3:19.

48. Uri Zvi Greenberg, *Complete Works* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1994), vol. 9, p. 11. [Hebrew]

49. Exodus 19:6.

50. It is worth emphasizing that biblical ontology is not anti-technology, along the lines of the "Deep Ecology" movements or the green parties. The Bible grants man the right—and even the obligation—to use nature for his needs, as taught in Genesis 1:28-29: "God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.' God said, 'See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.'" However, this use must be carried out with respect and commitment toward the biosphere in which we live. Man, in other words, is not the master of the world but its guardian, who was created "to till it and tend it." Genesis 2:15.